



The brand's creative director urges greater push towards 'three pillars' of sustainability.

# Raeburn pushes Timberland towards 'closed loop'

When Timberland hired “true visionary” Christopher Raeburn as creative director at the end of 2018, the UK-based designer vowed to push the company further towards the sustainable design and thinking he is known for. Since then he has implemented some radical ideas on materials and circularity, which are slowly being disseminated across parent group VF Corp (which includes Vans, The North Face and Altra).

“Fashion and clothing manufacturing is the second biggest polluter out there. You could look at this as being daunting but there’s such an opportunity to change,” says Mr Raeburn. “The reality is that people need clothes, footwear and

accessories but we need to be making these things in a positive way. If the work that I’ve learnt through my own company can be magnified through Timberland, and VF continues this through its other companies, then everything shifts together.”

At the start of 2019, Timberland, alongside Wrangler and the VF Foundation, invested \$150,000 into a research project run by seven US universities looking into regenerative ranching practices. These practices mimic the natural movement of herds by intensively grazing cattle herds in relatively small areas, which allows for regrowth of the grasses and healthier soil. Over the year, more partners joined the initiative and



Christopher Raeburn is filtering his ethos of recycling through the VF-owned brand.

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parent group VF stated it was ready to "combat the environmental impacts associated with leather production". Timberland is using the project to pilot a leather supply chain based on traceable hides from US farms, with the aim of launching collections incorporating this leather later this year.

Mr Raeburn tells *World Leather*, "To keep things simple you have three pillars: you make things recycled and recyclable, make things that are natural and go back to the earth, or you can make things that can be reused, repaired or rejuvenated. Those are the three pillars and that's what we need to drive towards."

### Sourcing credentials

Timberland sources from around 20 tanneries, including Prime Asia Vietnam, Tata in India, Lefarc in Mexico and Bojos Leathers in the Dominican Republic (many of whom have been finalists in *World Leather's* Tannery of the Year awards programme). In the third quarter 2018, 96% of leather it used was from Leather Working Group gold or silver-rated tanneries. By the third quarter of 2019 this had dipped slightly to 95%, which it pins on outsource partners rather than in its footwear: "We are working with our licensed goods and accessories partners to incorporate more leather from LWG-certified tanneries into their products," said Timberland. "Smaller quantities and price-point demands make this a challenge, however they understand the importance of using more responsible materials in their products."

The company still aims to source only from gold and silver rated tanneries this year (2020); parent group VF aims to hit that level next year.

### Recycled leather

One of the developments on the horizon is "recycled leather", and the company is conducting tests to try to create a material that could replace some of the leather in its footwear collections, although it is currently lacking the strength needed in core areas. "At the moment we are working with scrap leather from tanneries, but hypothetically it could be an old pair of Timberland boots," says Mr Raeburn.



### Using Instagram to connect

Timberland has designed concept boots made with recycled leather as part of Construct:10061 – a pilot design project based in its Dominican factory where designers from around the world are paired with footwear specialists and encouraged to 'think outside the box'.

Every six months a new team of designers travels to the factory to create as many iterations of the boot as they can. The finished products are uploaded to Instagram, where followers can 'like' their favourites.

"What we do as an industry is pretty archaic. We have incredibly long lead times, the design stage can take six months and the manufacturing can take another nine months, then we ship it to store," explains Christopher Raeburn. "Something we need to focus on is a much more agile way that we know customers want. It has to excite the individual and they have to want to keep that item."

The idea is that there will be more local factories, making more to order. Consumers are encouraged to follow the journey on social media.

He told us that one of the reasons for looking at leather is to reduce waste, as the yield from a hide can be "quite wasteful" but with recycled leather on a roll the yield is 97%. And unlike the Flyleather bonded product that Nike is using, it will not be backed with, or glued together with,

plastics: "That would be counterintuitive, I need to be quite clear on that."

He adds that where end-of-life and recycling concepts often fail is not necessarily the material innovation but the logistics. "Hypothetically, we can have a customer bring an item back to a store, but what happens beyond that? Has that item been designed originally for disassembly, is it all one material, or does it need to be pulled apart?"

"There have been tests done on 'design for disassembly' and the return of the product has been the big issue. Generally speaking, Timberland products are well made, they last a long time, and so when people have an emotional attachment to things, getting them back can be tricky. This is just one of the things we are grappling with."

### Targets

Timberland has ambitious sustainability targets, which have been laid down over the past few years with 2020 in mind as the end goal, when it expects: 100% of cotton will be US-origin, organic or Better Cotton (75% in 2019); all footwear will contain at least one element of recycled, organic or renewable material (69% in 2018); all footwear and apparel will be PFC-free (97% in 2018); and 100% of footwear featuring durable water repellents (DWR) will be perfluorinated chemicals free, up from 97% in 2018.

"I will do everything I can to bring responsible materials and method of make all the way through to the way we communicate, the way we educate and inspire," concludes Mr Raeburn. "It goes across a lot of different levels, but that is my role I've been brought in as global creative director not just looking at the progressive aesthetic of Timberland and how we push things forward but really to add responsible thinking."

"The slightly frustrating thing for me personally is that autumn-winter 2020 will be my first collection, and there's so much good product that's coming through but were not in a position to say 'here it is'; but it is coming. I take a lot of confidence that we're close to a lot of things around closed loop." 🌱